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ABSTRACT

An insight to be drawn from the writing problems of Harvard University (Massachusetts) students enrolled in a "basic writing" course is that the kinds of problems the students had were different in degree, but not in kind, from problems of less accomplished student writers elsewhere and from those all student writers have from time to time. These problems are similar to problems experienced adult writers confront in unfamiliar or difficult writing situations. Recognizing that even experienced writers face these difficulties, the basic writing course at Harvard (a second semester "expository writing" course) focused on meaning, fluency, revision, and building confidence. The stigma that was attached to the "basic writing" course was largely removed in the second year of the program when the course was renamed "Introduction to Expository Writing." The new title reflected the idea that the problems of "basic writers" are in fact much the same as problems basic to writing and that writing is always problematic. (RS)

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Basic Writers' Problems Are Problems Basic to Writing

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Abstract

Based on the author's experience establishing a "basic writing" program at Harvard University after having taught less accomplished basic writers at other universities, this paper argues for a redefinition of the term, basic writing, one that recognizes the relativity of courses designated as "basic" or "advanced." The paper identifies some of the writing problems typical of students who took the Harvard course, and argues that these problems are not unique to basic writers at Harvard nor to basic writers in general, but are difficulties that, to some degree, are experienced by most writers. A brief outline of the design of the Harvard course and a description of some of the assignments are also included.

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Panel: Toward a Redefinition of Basic Writing: What We Learned From Harvard's Basic Writers

Basic Writers' Problems Are Problems Basic to Writing

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If you place the words basic writing and Harvard University in close proximity you are likely to attract attention. When we instituted an additional semester of expository writing for a small number of Harvard's first year students who find writing especially difficult, the kind of attention we initially got was not always easy to manage. I can't imagine a university where inaugurating a "basic writing" course would be more of a public relations problem than it could have been at Harvard.

Since it was my responsibility to get the program off the ground, during the first weeks of fall term 1985 when we began, the greater part of my attention went into explaining the course to other faculty, to the students who would take it and, not to be taken lightly, to The Harvard Crimson. I found myself repeating these sentences: no, this is not a "remedial" course; no, I do not think the students have "serious problems with grammar"; yes, the course will require at least as much writing as is required in other writing courses; and no, Harvard's admissions standards are not going down. I'll return to this subject later because, with the exception of the word, Harvard, these are the same answers I must give now in directing a "developmental writing" program for students at California State University, Northridge who may more conventionally be named, basic writers.

At the end of our first year we counted ourselves successful. The students who took the course--none of whom wanted to take it--gave it excellent reviews; nearly all of these students' second term writing instructors reported that they did well in their courses. We even got good coverage from The Crimson. But what seems most important now, and is the subject both Duncan Carter and I will address today, is what we learned from working with Harvard's basic writers, what implications our experience has for the running of other writing programs, and what it revealed about the nature of basic writing problems. I should say that when I use the terms, "basic writing" or "basic writers," Harvard's or anyone else's, I put these words in quotes, as I hope, eventually, to put these words to rest.

Like other writing programs, ours identified students for the basic course by their performance, relative to their peers, on an impromptu writing sample. Because teachers in the Expository Writing Program at Harvard had long felt the need for an additional semester of writing for those students who finished the required one semester course still uncomfortable as writers, still struggling far more than their peers with writing assignments, we tried to identify such students by looking at writing on a placement exam. Since every entering student at Harvard must take one semester of Expository Writing (Expos, as it is called) there was no need for a placement test until we added the additional course, Expos 10. It is at this moment in a writing program's history, when a placement test is instituted, that one most readily notices the relativity of course designations.

Before teaching at Harvard, I had taught basic writing courses at Queens College of the City University of New York and at the Santa Barbara and San Diego campuses of the University of California; in my new job at Cal State, Northridge, I direct a program of it. As a widely travelled writing teacher, it seems clear to me that basic is a relative term. The Expos 10

students were basic writers relative to their peers at Harvard. Elsewhere, these students might have been in honors English; in fact, they often were advanced placement English students in their high schools or prep schools. Advanced is, of course, another relative designation. I can find myself at one university teaching, in a basic course, students who are more advanced than the advanced students I had in another university's advanced course. And I have had this experience.

Writing research that focuses on errors may make us feel that there are absolutes that can be applied to the term, basic writing. When we identify features of student texts either to investigate writing problems or to design pedagogy we may feel we are locating absolute criteria, that a certain kind of sentence construction, or gap in coherence is an identifying mark of a "basic writer." But our decision to label these features, "basic" is made because of their appearance in a particular writing sample, because of the way we as readers evaluate a student text as advanced or remedial. Cutoff lines for basic writing courses are always dependent on the range of writing in a given population and, on something even less absolute, the availability of funding and course allotments. In a real sense, we had no basic writing students at Harvard until we created a course of basic writing.

And yet, in spite of the absolute relativity I observe in the term basic writing, there are such things as writing problems, some common denominators among students in basic courses at all levels that I think we can identify.

One of my own goals when we began the Expos 10 program was to discover what Harvard students could teach us about the nature of writing problems. In other student populations, poor writers may be poor students generally, but at Harvard, the students' difficulties, whatever they might turn out to be, would not be tied to poor motivation or general lack of affinity for

academic work. When I started teaching at Harvard, I thought I might be able to view writing problems in isolation, to identify what, specifically, students find most difficult about writing. When I left the program I found myself able to do this, but not in the way I had imagined. I had learned a great deal from Harvard students, yet while I had expected to understand more about "conventional" basic writers because of the ways they might differ from students at Harvard, I had learned, instead, from similarities.

An insight about writing problems I can draw from teaching "basic writing" at Harvard is that the kinds of problems our students had were different in degree, but not in kind, both from problems of less accomplished student writers elsewhere and from those all student writers have from time to time, problems that even more experienced adult writers have in unfamiliar or difficult writing situations. Stated epigrammatically, I learned that basic writers' problems are problems basic to writing.

To locate writing problems it seems appropriate to examine writers' texts. We can look at a student text, or any text, to identify its infelicities, its weaknesses, at either the sentence or whole essay level. Looking at Expos 10 students' essays we can say they lacked development, clear argument, convincing evidence. The organization was often illogical; the language, awkward and imprecise; the reasoning superficial. Essays by students who went into our course seemed less sophisticated than those of the rest of the freshman class, as if the writers of these essays had less to say. At the sentence level, these students were weak writers in comparison to their peers, but they were all writers of "Standard English." Whereas students in more conventional basic writing courses might have more problems of usage and mechanics than their fellow students, Expos 10 students might be distinguished as having more diction and tone problems, less sentence complexity, and so on.

As writers and teachers it is not difficult for us to identify what is wrong, missing, or inappropriate in a student text. And if we were editors, and not teachers, this is all we would have to do. But as teachers we have a different task, and an extraordinarily difficult one, for the problems we identify in a text cannot serve as reliable guidelines for teaching.

At Cal State, Northridge I often sit on interview committees for students who are in the teaching credential program in English. As part of our interview we ask the credential candidate to respond to a piece of student writing. Some of the candidates start right in; they say, "This student needs to learn how to organize an essay," or "The writer has a good idea but it isn't developed enough." The stronger candidates, however, are those who ask us questions: what was the assignment? is this an early draft? was there time for prewriting? even, who wrote this? which I think is an excellent question, for an early draft by a professional writer, as Don Murray likes to remind us, may look as incomplete and "basic" as any draft turned in by one of our basic writing students. The crucial difference between the two drafts would be the difference between the two writers' ways of viewing their own work.

Problems for writers like those in Expos 10 are not merely the infelicities and inadequacies of their texts, but the limitations of their approaches to writing tasks, how they read their drafts, what they understand about the kind of discourse they are attempting to compose, whether they think of revision as rewording or making more global changes, and so on. It is not the text that tells us what needs to be taught, but the student, what the student thinks about his or her work and what the student knows or does not know about the process of writing, of which the text is only one piece and often a misleading piece of evidence.

Basic writing research starting with Mina Shaughnessey has demonstrated the extent to which the texts basic writers produce are misleading measures of the kind of thinking these

students are doing. Shaughnessey, in fact, directed us to investigate the "errors" that students make (error is another word to keep in quotes) in order to discover the thinking behind their discourse, the thinking that their impoverished texts might belie.

So we did not begin our course of instruction by tackling the problems in our students' texts, so much as by ignoring them, or at least appearing to ignore them. Instead of addressing the flaws apparent in the writing, we attempted to address the underlying difficulties with writing our students experienced. We were less guided by the question, "what is wrong with this prose?" than by the question, "how did it get to look this way?"

Here are some things we noticed. Because they might be blocked about writing assignments, Expos 10 students tended to write less than other Harvard freshmen. The papers they produced were frequently shorter and, we discovered right away, our students were not used to writing multiple drafts. Some of them did write copiously in an essay, but often by repeating points without elaboration. None of the students in my classes had heard of freewriting. Apprehensions about their own abilities as writers and a limited understanding of the complexity and the possibilities of the process of writing resulted in essays that were superficial and incomplete.

While a draft produced by an Expos 10 student might appear to have been written by someone who had little concern for form or craft, conferences with our students revealed that they worried even less about meaning. They wanted to know whether a piece "flowed" or was "smooth enough," whether it "sounded right," about whether the grammar was correct. Our colleague, Catherine Tudish noticed that in her classes the most salient feature of students' essays was actually a missing feature, the lack of supporting evidence. But in conference our students seemed to have few worries about what they were going to say, as if that were already

determined by their topic, as if writing were mostly a matter of transcription, so that their main problem was to get words to "flow" as effortlessly as they should.

In this, they exhibited characteristics we had encountered before with less accomplished student writers, behaviors identified by researchers who have studied basic writers' composing processes, such as Sondra Perl, working with conventional basic writers or Mike Rose working with competent but blocked writers-- competent is another relative term-- who found that students' attention to form and correctness may inhibit and block their ability to write; or Nancy Sommers whose revision study identified ways in which a writer's understanding of the writing process affects his or her competency .

We identified nine basic writing problems among the students in our course.

Basic Writing Problems

1. Lacking confidence in one's ability to write.
2. Having trouble getting started on writing tasks.
3. Becoming easily discouraged during writing tasks.
4. Composing by what Peter Elbow calls "the dangerous method," trying to get it right, paragraph by paragraph or line by line, the first time.
5. Attempting to write a one-draft version of a paper.
6. Thinking of writing assignments as tests one will either pass or fail.
7. Trying to write down only what seems already clear or known rather than using writing as an aid to learning or to discovering ideas.
8. Believing that one's writing problems are primarily the fault of poor vocabulary.

inadequate style, difficulty with "grammar," or the inability to write quickly.

9. Having greater concern for form and appearance than for meaning in one's writing.

We might summarize these problems, by saying that the students in the basic course had a limited view of writing and of themselves as writers.

Perhaps at this point it is necessary to remind ourselves that we are still talking about students who are among the most outstanding freshmen in the country. They have no marks of what Patricia Bizzelle calls the "outlandishness" of basic writers. They do not have trouble writing because they are unprepared for the university--many of them have been preparing for schools such as Harvard all their lives--but for a variety of other reasons: because their strengths and interests are in other disciplines; because their past experience with writing makes them see it as test taking; because they haven't before been encouraged to revise essays; mostly, perhaps, because writing is difficult.

The Harvard students' writing problems are ones I had seen before--and have seen since--while working with less accomplished students in other basic courses. I would find it hard to say that writers at any level of accomplishment have a monopoly on writing problems. Given a difficult task and the pressure of time any of us may experience at least some of these problems. We may berate ourselves for not working quickly enough; we may lack confidence, feel we are not up to the task ahead of us; we may even find ourselves distracted from the meaning we are working toward by the fact that our paper doesn't sound polished enough. As better writers, we eventually remind ourselves to focus on what it is we are trying to say, to freewrite, for example, on the difficult parts, or to get response that may help us to continue. We have such options available so we less often feel trapped in the first words we mangle to get onto the page.

A writing course that would address the kinds of problems I have identified, would attempt to provide students with the kinds of experiences that are more familiar to better writers. So our course focused on meaning, on fluency, on revision and, by attention to these issues, on building confidence.

Let me briefly outline some of what we did. In the early weeks of the semester and at the beginning of each writing assignment we concentrated on invention, on expressive and exploratory writing. For their first assignment, while they were experimenting with various invention heuristics, we asked students to write 5,000 words in two weeks. We gave them a list of 50 topics; they could write 100 words on each topic or 5000 words on one topic or they could choose their own topics. This assignment, which is adapted from one by Sheridan Blau, allowed students to explore many kinds of writing, to dissolve a lot of their resistance to writing, and demonstrated to them how much they could actually produce. The 5,000 words did not need to be revised. By the time we got to the second assignment, a 3 to 5 page paper to be completed in the next two weeks, it was clear to everyone that in order to produce a finished essay it is necessary both to generate material as well as to revise it.

The more structured assignments led students to engage in the process of revising by asking them to view material--a text, or an experience, or gathered data--from one perspective, perhaps chronologically, and then redraft by looking at the material from another perspective, for example, analytically. In his talk, Duncan will explain of one of the assignments in our sequence which, overall, attempted to travel up Jim Moffett's scale of abstraction. The essential component, of which any assignment we devised is merely one workable example, was that we concentrated entirely on meaning. I asked students in my class to spend some time editing pieces for class publications, but as a general guide, we felt that those writers who have the most

difficulty at the sentence level are those who can least benefit from instruction at the sentence level.

This, I think, is a useful guideline for basic writing instruction at any school, but one I might not have learned so completely had I not taught the basic course at Harvard. At Harvard, it seemed incongruous to call this course, basic writing. And in conclusion, I would like to comment on this incongruity, for where the terms, basic writer and basic writing begin to seem inappropriate, changes in both our superficial and deeper attitudes toward our students will more readily occur.

In the second year of the program, we changed the course title to "Introduction to Expository Writing." This change had a remarkable, silencing effect on the kinds of questions I mentioned at the beginning of my talk I needed to respond to when we started the program, questions implying that the course or the students or both did not belong in the university. By the second year, the word was out that Expos 10 was a serious writing course, one where you had to write at least 5,000 words more than you had to write in other courses, that being recommended for Expos 10 was something like being asked to take French 1 when you had expected to start in French 2, no more onerous than that. The second year, we even had several students volunteer for the course because they wanted the extra time to work on their writing. And if I had not been there for that period of transition I might be tempted to discount its importance, to say, well, of course they volunteered, that's Harvard; students are highly motivated.

But the fact is our course, like basic writing courses anywhere, appeared to be instituted for students, who at least in the area of writing, were somehow different, endangered, basic. Certainly no one that first year would have volunteered to be marked this way as an inferior

student. However, given the kinds of students who attend Harvard, such misconceptions could not last long, and I rather enjoyed my short-lived opportunity to say, "If this course is remedial, we must not be at Harvard."

As Mike Rose has pointed out, the assumption that we are in the business of remediation, wherever we are teaching, is misguided. The students in Expos 10 had writing problems but since they presented us with no distracting signs of "outlandishness" either in their writing or speech or school behavior, at Harvard it was easy to remember what at other schools, perhaps, we must work to remember: that writing is always problematic; the important thing is making meaning. College students, at any level, can learn to revise, to become engaged in a subject, to respond helpfully to each other's work-in-progress and in doing so will show us what Don Graves has found with elementary school children, that if we "let them write," they will.